

What About Those Who Have Never Heard?

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Romans 10:17 reads, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (NIV). But what about those who have never heard? This is probably one of the most common questions or objections to Christianity. It's also sometimes phrased as, "What about the heathen?" In other words, is it fair for God to condemn people who never had an opportunity to hear the message of Christ?

There are many ways to approach this question. This article will focus on the motivations of the person asking the question, reasonable answers to it, and a look at what the Bible has to say on the matter.

WHAT MOTIVATES THE QUESTION?

Often the question is asked as a diversion. It immediately takes away the focus on the person asking the question and shifts a problem back to the Christian. This is not to say it's not a legitimate question (it is), but the motivation is not always a sincere desire to get an answer. Of course, ignoring the question is not helpful, either, as this gives the impression that the Christian doesn't care or doesn't have a good answer.

Sometimes it's a legitimate question driven by real concern over the nature of God. If He's really all loving, then the fact that He appears to condemn those who have never heard the gospel comes across as harsh, unmerciful and unjust. The important thing to remember is that after answering the question make sure to bring the discussion back to a personal response to Christ.

A point related to the motivation for the question has to do with truth. Does the question, however it is answered, change whether or not Christianity is true? It doesn't. If God exists and has revealed Himself to us, and if Christ is the only way to God, then the question may puzzle us, but it won't change the truth of the Christian message.

GOD'S NATURE, REVELATION, AND OUR RESPONSE

The answer to the question relates to God's nature, His revelation and our response. Biblically speaking, God is holy, just, unchanging and all-loving. This means that God will always do what is right.

When it comes to God's revelation, theologians divide these into God's special and general revelation. His special revelation includes the Bible and Christ. These are both direct and special means of God revealing Himself to us. General revelation, sometimes called natural revelation, consists of what God has revealed of Himself via the natural world and moral conscience.

Two passages in Romans further explain general revelation: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20) and "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15). Taken together these passages claim that everyone has an inherent knowledge of God, that this can be *clearly* known from creation and that everyone also has a God-given moral compass.

Is it true, then, that "those who have never heard," really have no idea of God's existence or of their moral responsibilities? Biblically speaking, it's not true. "Those who have never heard" have heard something and they do have access to key information about God. They know that God exists, that there is a moral standard and that they have broken this standard.

THE CASE OF CORNELIUS

Second Peter 3:9 reads, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." God desires that everyone come to Him via Christ, but not all will. We, however, do not have access to a list of who will respond to God and who will not. As such, biblical Christianity places a great deal of emphasis on missionary efforts.

Romans 10:13-15 underscores the significance of Christian evangelism when it comes to reaching those who have never heard: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

In other words, Christians are actively spreading the message of Jesus so that "those who have never heard" will indeed get an opportunity to hear. Various missionary stories support the fact that often times those who have never heard who have responded to God's general revelation are later visited by Christian missionaries.

The Bible, for instance, records just such a story about a man named Cornelius. This man knew about God, but not about Christ. Because of his sincere desire to know God, Cornelius came in direct contact with the Apostle Peter who told Cornelius about Jesus (see Acts 10 for the entire story).

FAULTY ASSUMPTIONS

In their book *Faith Comes by Hearing*, Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson write, “How could it be fair and just for those who have never even had a chance to hear the gospel, which is necessary for salvation, to be condemned to hell? The question sounds powerful, but behind it lie faulty assumptions.” Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, editors, *Faith Comes by Hearing* (InterVarsity, 2008), 241. Questions about hell are addressed in another article in this series ([“Is Hell Real?”](#)).

What are these “faulty assumptions”? “The first mistaken assumption,” continue Morgan and Peterson, “is that our condemnation is based on a rejection of the gospel. Scripture teaches that our condemnation is based on the fact that we are sinners, not because at some point in time we rejected the gospel ... Furthermore, God’s wrath is revealed against everyone who suppresses his truth revealed through creation ... Strictly speaking, the Bible denies that there are persons who have never heard of God.” Ibid.

Morgan and Peterson go on to explain another faulty assumption, this one having to do with “a confusion of justice and mercy.” Ibid., 242 God is merciful in that He has provided a way of salvation via Christ for those who will accept Him. But God is also just in that unrepentance will not go unnoticed.

GOD’S WAY IS WIDE ENOUGH

We know that God will deal fairly with those who have not received a direct presentation of the gospel, just as He will deal fairly with those who have. But is God’s way too narrow? Far from it. God’s way is wide enough for everyone willing to accept it and receive Christ. The most important question any of us can answer is the one Jesus asked his own disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20).